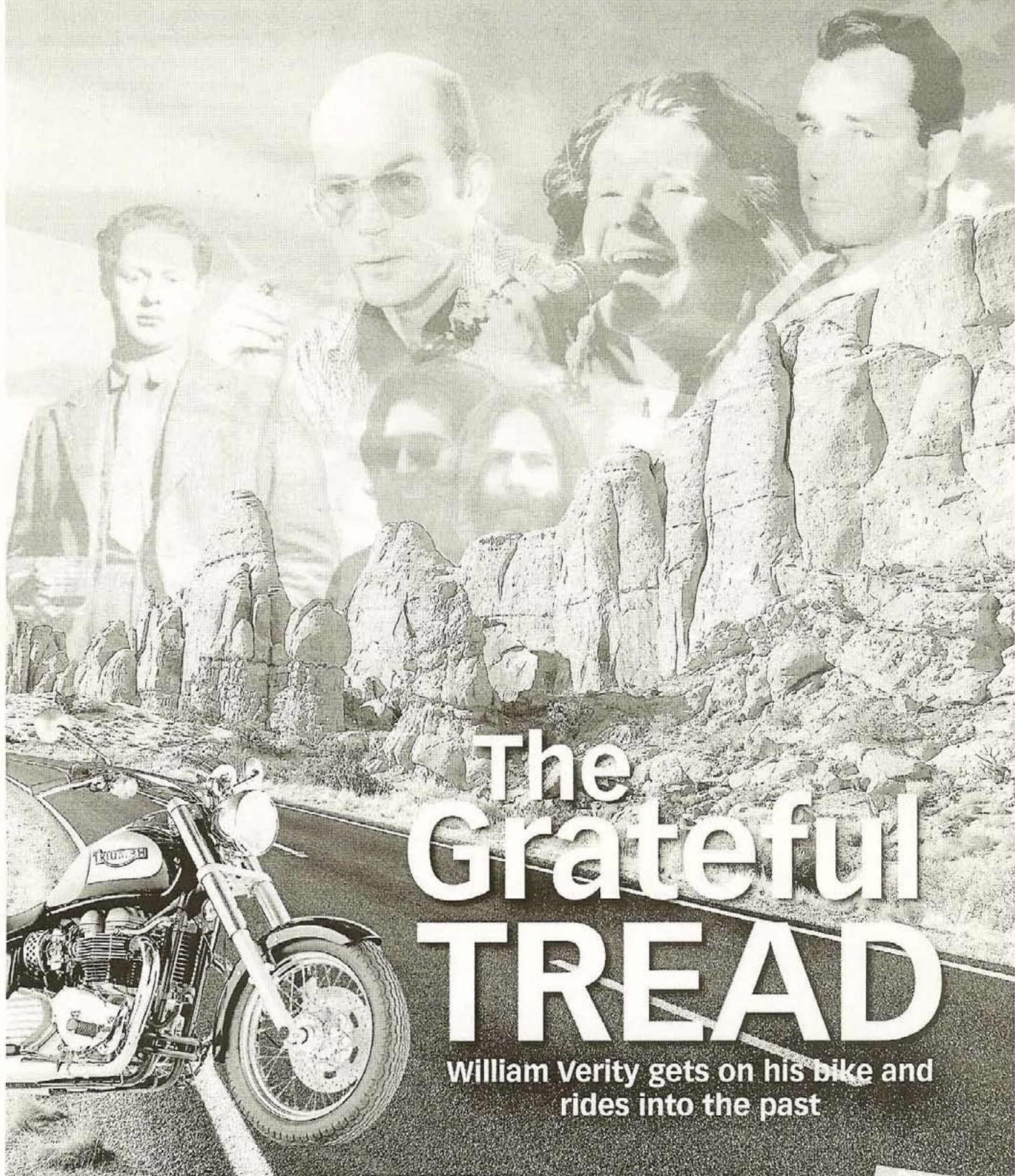


MERCURY

# weekender

May 31-June 1, 2008



## The Grateful TREAD

William Verity gets on his bike and rides into the past

ALSO NEIL DIAMOND:  
SOLITARY MAN



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# The Grateful tread

Life does not get much better than riding around the backroads of America on a Triumph Bonneville motorcycle in the springtime, writes WILLIAM VERITY.



"What I would like to do is use the time that is coming now to talk about some things that have come to mind.

"We're in such a hurry most of the time we never get much chance to talk. The result is a kind of endless day-to-day shallowness, a monotony that leaves a person wondering years later where all the time went and sorry that it's all gone.

"Now that we do have some time, and know it, I would like to use the time to talk in some depth about things that seem important."

I wish I had written those words. More to the point, I wish I had thought those thoughts first... maybe I did. Hard to say whether they mirrored my thinking when I was a teenager or created them.

Probably a bit of both.

They come from the opening passage of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig, a book that so profoundly influenced my life that it scared me when I re-read it last year after a gap of 20 years.

Maybe that's where the urge

came from, to get back on a bike, to shed the obligations of a young family and take to the open road. To fulfil a promise I made to myself when I was 21 and riding from Denver to New Orleans on a Honda CB750 - that I would return.

Call it a mid-life crisis if you will, except you'd be wrong. I know about crises and this didn't feel like one. It felt simply like something I had to do.

So the planning began. The initial plan to travel from San Francisco to Montana - a mirror of Pirsig's journey - was quickly abandoned after a weather website told me that "April is when Montana gains most of its moisture".

In other words, it rains and snows a lot.

"I would take the southern option, head for the desert," my American cousin and former motorcyclist advised me. I took his advice.

The next obstacle, to find a bike, was remarkably easy. A quick internet search revealed a couple of places, the most promising was a bike rental garage, run by Wolfgang, an amiable German backpacker who never left.

His range included the obvious American tourer - a Harley Davidson ElectraGlide - but it was a little more expensive than another dream bike and a left-field choice, a Triumph Bonneville.

Named after the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, where it achieved numerous motorcycle speed records, it has impeccable Sixties

cool - famously crashed by Bob Dylan in 1967.

A year later, stunt man Evel Knievel chose the Triumph Bonneville for his attempt at jumping the Caesars Palace fountain in Las Vegas.

Wolfgang asked me where I wanted to go and, when I told him, "Ten days down the coast and into the desert", he sent me a map with a suggested route highlighted, demonstrating that he understood another rule of Zen motorcycling.

Always choose the backroads. "We want to make good time, but for us now this is measured with emphasis on 'good' rather than 'time' and when you make that shift in emphasis the whole approach changes," Pirsig writes.

"Roads with little traffic are more enjoyable, as well as safer.

"Roads free of drive-ins and billboards are better, roads where groves and meadows and orchards and lawns come almost to the shoulder, where kids wave to you when you ride by, where people look from their porches to see who it is... where people ask where you're from and how long you've been riding."

So the plan was this: Start out in San Francisco, head down the famous Big Sur coast road that winds along the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains, where they meet the Pacific Ocean.

Then take a left before reaching Los Angeles (a bleak place utterly devoid of backroads) and head over the mountains to the Mojave Desert, Death Valley, Las Vegas, the Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon.

Back via a couple of mountain national parks (Yosemite and Sequoia) then down into the fertile Californian Central Valley. The place where the oranges and nuts are grown.

With the exception of India and possibly a couple of Chinese cities, there is nowhere else on Earth other than the United States where there's an unmistakable feeling of being at the centre of things.

Americans know it too, which is why so many are so ignorant about the rest of the world, but it's a fault that's understandable, if not forgivable, to anyone who's

travelled from coast to coast.

It's a place - to paraphrase poet Walt Whitman - that contains multitudes, and so much more complex and interesting than the Los Angeles and New York pap that so dominates movie and TV land.

For a start, you quickly realise that unlike in Australia, most Americans live in small towns not big cities and in communities and landscapes so diverse, so unexpected, so vast as to defy description.

Yet for anyone born in the 20th century, American culture has been so pervasive that, even for first-timers, it's as if you've been here before.

Riding out on the first day, I reach a junction in the road on the way to my first destination, Clint Eastwood's home town of Carmel.

The sign offers me a choice of right to Monterey or left to Salinas.

I've never been here before, yet both names are so familiar, so evocative. How many recordings have I heard that were "Live at the Monterey Jazz Festival"? And Salinas. How is that familiar?

The words from *Me and Bobby McGee* come into my head and then stay there on constant playback as I battle the ferocious gusts blowing off Monterey Bay:

"Then somewhere near Salinas, Lord, I let her slip away,

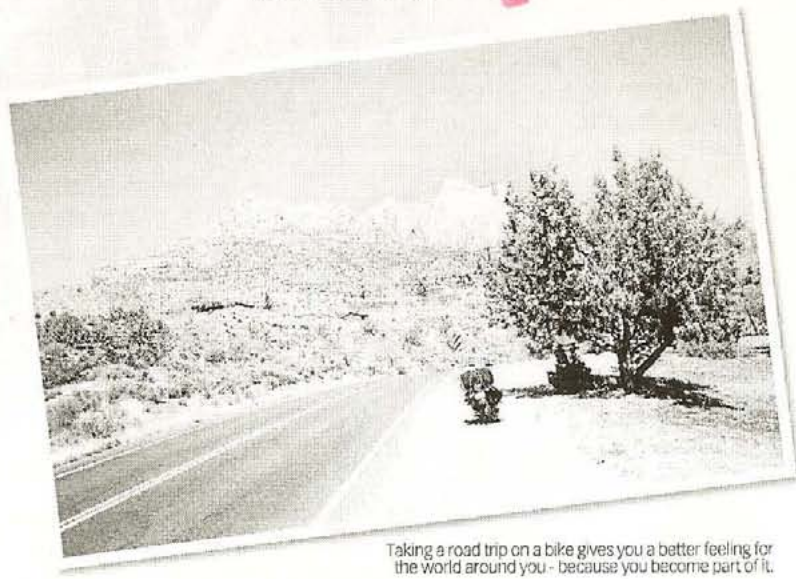
She was looking for the love and I hope she finds it."

By the time I reach the motel at Carmel, I'm meditating on the truth of the chorus that, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose".

Then it's up at dawn and riding one of the world's great motorbike roads, along the Big Sur, the place where beatnik Jack Kerouac - author of another travel classic, *On the Road* - sought relief from fame and alcohol.

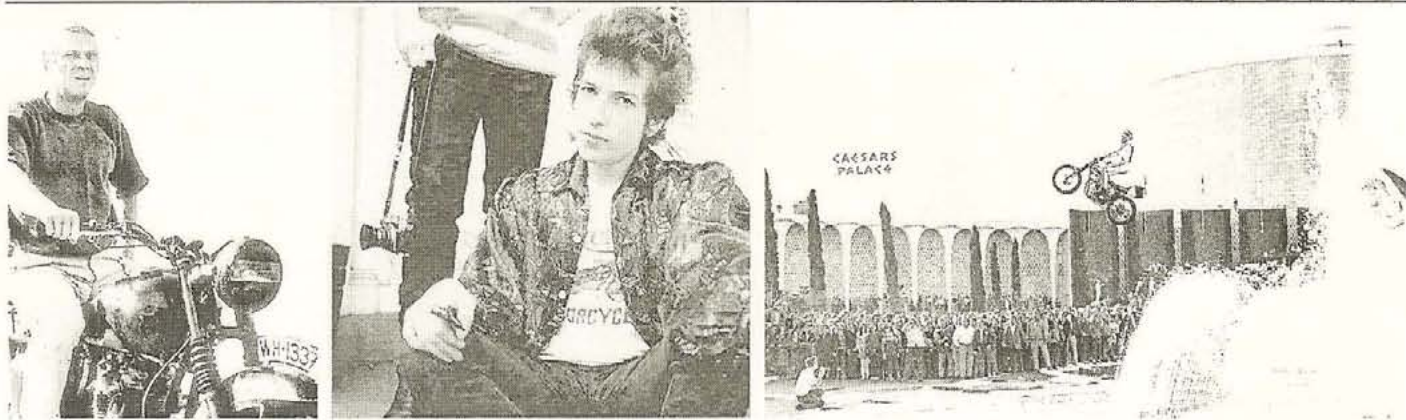
His ghost has already impacted on this journey, toasting him with a glass of beer at Vesuvio's, the San Francisco pub that helped to hurry both Kerouac and Welsh poet Dylan Thomas to an early alcoholic grave.

Then the bike takes me east, over the mountains and on to the desert where the road stretches straight almost to the horizon and gas stations are churches of salvation for



Taking a road trip on a bike gives you a better feeling for the world around you - because you become part of it.

Most Americans live in communities and landscapes so diverse, so unexpected, so vast as to defy description.



Steve McQueen (left) was a fan of the Triumph Bonneville. It was also the bike Bob Dylan (centre) was riding when he crashed in '67 and, a year later, Evel Knievel (right) used one to jump the Caesars Palace fountain in Las Vegas.

a rider with a maximum tank range of 160km.

Death Valley, on the eastern edge of California is nothing if not extreme and is one of half a dozen national parks within a few days drive that need to be experienced.

Sitting on the rim looking into Death Valley, with the late afternoon sun warming the black leather jacket on my back, the Bonneville like a trusty steed beside me, I feel alive.

Outside of the Sahara desert, this is the hottest place on earth having recorded a top of 57°C but is also capable of dropping to minus 9°C in winter.

Although it is also the driest place in North America with an average annual rainfall of less than 5cm, the fact that it is more than 86m below sea level means that there are areas where permanent water exists.

One such is the aptly named Badwater, named by the 19th century surveyor who took his mule to water but couldn't make it drink. The springs at the base of the high valley sides produced water so saline that few species can survive.

That is because the water comes from distant rain that has leached through miles of rock, picking up a rich collection of minerals along the way.

As the saltwater evaporates in the hot sun, this creates that famous flat salt pans that stretch along the flat valley floor like a shimmering mirage of ice.

One can only imagine the desperation and bravery of those first European pioneers who found themselves stranded in the valley for a month in 1849, finding drinkable water at Furnace Creek, still one of only two small settlements in the almost 8000sq km park.

No wonder, the myth has them calling the place Death Valley as they finally found a way through and westwards to the California coast.

Yet, even this harshest of environments has supported human life for thousands of years and members of the Timbisha tribe still live at Furnace Creek, where there is a campground, gas station and resort.

It's a surprisingly varied environment, best visited out of summer for obvious reasons, but one that can quite easily take a few days to see properly.

This is a road trip, and I don't have time.

And maybe this is the point of it all. The parks, the cities, the nostalgia of Route 66 are merely the excuse for something else - a physical journey to be sure, but also

a mental journey both back in time and into the future.

Back to all those things that formed me half a lifetime ago - the books, the songs, the great American dream of freedom. The freedom of Pirsig, Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson, Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead, not the fake freedom of George Bush that needs war to sustain it.

It's a chance to be alone for 10 days, talking to no-one, checking that the values are still sound, that the life direction is still sure.

But there's also a paradox about the motorcycle road trip, that moving through the landscape at speed slows the mind and makes everything real.

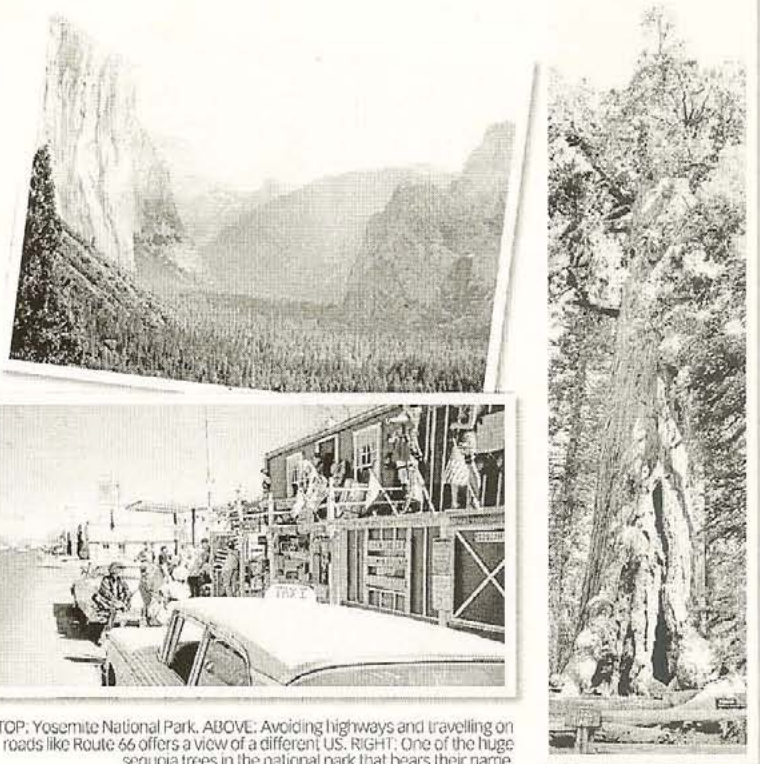
"You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other," writes Pirsig.

"In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it, you don't realise that through the car window everything you see is just more TV.

"You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame.

"On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all... the whole experience is never removed from immediate consciousness."

I wish I could put it better, but I can't.



TOP: Yosemite National Park. ABOVE: Avoiding highways and travelling on roads like Route 66 offers a view of a different US. RIGHT: One of the huge sequoia trees in the national park that bears their name.

